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ABSTRACT

To address the issue of how effectively speech communication instructors can be trained to develop longitudinal, "value-added" skills in their students one must first ask if they "should" be trained for such a task. One advantage is that it might be strategic for communication programs to initiate value-added testing so faculty might assume their own accountability and better control the instruments and procedures involved. Value-added testing might also provide more tangible research evidence that speech communication teaching methods produce the skills professed in the discipline. Alleged disadvantages include teachers' fear that poor "talent development" shown by their students might be used in a punitive way. This understandable fear can be offset by chairpersons making it clear that the longitudinal information on students is an integral part of the educational process. A review of the successful programs in Missouri and New York is enough to minimize the argument against misuse of value-added testing. To allay fears and maximize advantages, individual departments initiating value-added testing would be urged to select the instrument that appears most appropriate to their unique departmental mission. The Communication Competency Assessment Instrument, developed as an alternative method of assessing skills, was founded on the principle that assessment should be based on actual speaking and listening behaviors: all responses are either oral or nonverbal. Such an instrument could be administered as a pretest and posttest to undergraduate speech students. (HTH)

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How Effectively Can Speech Communication Instructors Be Trained to Develop Value-Added Skills in Their Students?

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The theme of the 1986 CSSA Conference is "Competent Communicators" and this particular program deals with classroom training and measurement for those competent communicators. We are more definitively addressing the subject of skills than competence. Competence generally refers to knowledge or understanding of communication situations and their requirements, whereas skill refers to the demonstrated ability to meet those requirements. The two are closely related, and it was about the latter that Robert Maynard Hutchins made the still-applicable observation that "communication skills are the only effective remedies for contemporary intellectual deficits."[1]

But our theme pertains to a particular kind of skills. They are longitudinal, value-added skills. More precisely, we're talking about pre-testing and post-testing students at different undergraduate stages to measure the extent of oral communication skills they have acquired. The issue addressed in this paper is: "How Effectively Can Speech Communication Instructors be Trained to Develop 'Value-Added' Skills in Their Students?"

First, one must ask if they should be trained for such a task. There are several advantages for their doing so. One is that it might be strategically wise for communication programs to initiate value-added testing at this time, so the faculty involved might assume their own accountability and better control the instruments and procedures involved. The Chronicle of Higher Education tells us that, at the request of "legislatures and governing boards, a growing number of public colleges and universities are using 'value-added' tests and surveys in an attempt to measure what students learn in college.

"Although only a small number of states . . . have adopted the value-added approach, the concept has attracted the attention of legislators who want to make colleges more accountable for the education they provide."[2]

The article proceeded to note that state coordinating boards require value-added testing in Tennessee and South Dakota. Several other states,

including Colorado, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia, are considering similar requirements.[3] Other recent publications have noted that such institutions as the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, King's College, Southwest Texas State, Alverno College, and Northeast Missouri State, have such assessment programs in effect.[4] In short, the public demand is there, and testing programs, initiated and operated judiciously by faculty, themselves, can go far toward reestablishing public attitudes toward higher education. In an article in Change, just four months ago, Peter Ewell said:

> Higher education, particularly public higher education, has historically been held to levels of accountability that would be unthinkably lax in other service sectors. Largely this was a consequence of wide-spread public confidence that academe knew what it was doing. In recent years, that confidence has eroded to the point that simple assertions of effectiveness are no longer sufficient. State-mandated assessment, many legislators feel, is one way of testing these assertions. Institutional assessment, if it is perceived to be undertaken rigorously and with an eye toward self-improvement, however, can be equally effective in re-establishing external confidence.[5]

Ewell noted considerable recent evidence that institutions taking the initiative in proposing quality longitudinal assessment, without waiting for such programs to be explicitly mandated by forces outside higher education, such as in Tennessee and New Jersey, seem to enjoy "excellent legislative and gubernatorial support for proposed initiatives."[6]

From a pedagogical perspective, as it relates to skills courses proper in speech communication, there is a stronger reason. Value-added testing might provide more tangible research evidence that the methods of teaching speech communication causally produce the skills professed in the discipline. Gerald Phillips admonishes that "our claim to special academic ground is based on our ability to improve performance, a claim we have not yet 'proved up'. . . . Replacing emulation of social science with a commitment to our own tradition may be just what the discipline needs, and the competence/skill quest may be

just the way to get it."[7]

Phillips tells us that speech communication teachers believe their methods work, and he suspects that they are right, but the connection between teaching method and skills is hard to make. There are no studies which demonstrate the relationship of instructor criticism or of reading a textbook on effective speechmaking to actual improved performance.[8]

Alternatively, maybe such demonstration can be made through the testing process, particularly through value-added testing. This was suggested in a 1984 report of The Study Group on the Conditions of "Excellence in Higher Education." It recommended that prospective and newly hired instructors receive much more extensive training in assessment procedures (designing, administering, and interpreting tests of various types).[9]

Whether in speech communication skills areas or those in any other discipline, traditional testing and evaluating methods do not show what, or even if, a student has learned in class. Nevertheless, attempts to assess "value-added" skills can seem threatening to faculty members. In his book, Achieving Educational Excellence, Alexander Astin, tells us that "the fundamental problem with traditional course grades is that they do not necessarily assess change or improvement in the students' cognitive skills. Rather, they measure the performance of students relative to one another at the end of the course."[10]

If instructors were trained in testing for talent development skills, they could even go farther than assessing student advancement; they would also have a check on how well their speech methods are working:

> Assessing a curriculum or program means more than simply looking at what students know when they leave. It means first taking into account their prior knowledge and characteristics. The resulting "value added" or "talent development" approach to assessment, in its strictest form, requires pre- and post-testing of students using essentially the same types of measurement instruments.[11]

To this point, then, the answer to the issue of whether speech communication instructors should be trained to administer value-added testing in the classroom, is yes. However, there are some alleged disadvantages that shed doubt on the issue of whether or not they would consent to being trained for such testing. The instructors could oppose the procedure out of fear that poor "talent development" by their students would be interpreted as a mark against them personally. They could see it as an administrative stratagem for monitoring their teaching performance, a basis for rewarding or punishing them. This is an understandable fear, but can be offset by chairpersons' making it clear that the longitudinal information on students is an integral part of the educational process. The instructors must be assured and share the conviction that student development has the highest priority. To provide any reason to think otherwise would nullify prospects for the program's success. A review of the successful programs at Northeast Missouri and at SUNY Albany, is enough to minimize the argument against misuse of "value-added" of testing. "In both cases [Northeast Missouri and SUNY Albany]. . . assessment data are used to raise issues for discussion rather than to provide a rationale for cutting resources for 'non-performers.' This positive use of results had increased acceptance of the assessment process by faculty and mid-level administrators."[12]

Independent handling of the data by the departments allows even greater cooperation by the faculty involved. Ewell tells us that "acceptance is enhanced even more . . . when faculty and department chairs can use assessment data themselves -- to examine and improve the curriculum."[13]

Even if faculty within individual departments are agreed that such testing will be used strictly for student development and not faculty "punishment," there is another fear that "any assessment across institutions will be simplistic, incomplete, and insensitive to differences of mission; the results could

be misinterpreted and lead to inappropriate prescriptions; bad information could be used to infringe upon institutional autonomy."[14] Yet, it can be said that such cross-institutional uses of test results have never occurred.

Another fear was expressed by William W. Turnbull, distinguished scholar in residence at the Federal Testing Service and former president of that organization. He suggested that instructors, fearing punitive use of value-added test results, will feel forced to "teach students skills on standardized tests at the expense of other subject areas."[15] This did happen in the past when preparing students for commercial radio operators' licenses. Yet, the prospects for this happening in speech communications skills tests would greatly depend on the instrument, how it was prepared and administered. To allay fears and maximize advantages, individual departments initiating value-added testing would be urged to select the instrument that appeared most appropriate to their unique departmental mission. Alexander Astin reminds us that "the talent development approach does not require the use of any particular assessment method. Objective tests, essays, oral examinations, performance examinations, and various other techniques may be appropriate depending on the content and objectives of the course or program in question."[16]

For speech communication, there are some instruments that include oral testing. These include the American College Outcomes Measurement Project (COMP) Battery, which uses such devices as audio recordings and filmstrips. Students respond in several written and oral modes. Another is McBer Company's Behavioral Event Interview in which the student's responses are given a detailed analysis for what they reveal about the student's skills. Both COMP and the McBer Interview produce scores on such capacities as communication skills and critical thinking abilities.[17]

Most directly connected to speech communication is the instrument designed not for "value-added" testing but to assess competency; this, of course, is the

Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI). While it was not designed for talent development testing, per se, such an instrument could be administered to the same speech communication students twice in their undergraduate career. It has been consolidated to a short form of nineteen items.[18]

The CCAI was developed as an "alternative method of assessing skills and was founded on the principle that skills tests should assess only skills, and not knowledge about communication theories or principles, and that the assessment should be based on actual speaking and listening behaviors."[19]

On the CCAI, every student response is either oral or nonverbal. It is assessed only in terms of the student's speaking, nonverbal, and listening skills. It has five categories for each of the nineteen questions: 5 = superior, 4 = above average, 3= adequate (competent), 2 = below average, and 1 = unacceptable. Thus, it has a total of 94 possible points, and the average is 57 points. The instrument was tested at the University of Wisconsin at Parkside for such factors as reliability, validity, and time for administration. The co-efficient alpha for the nineteen-item test was .78, and each test lasted for less than thirty minutes.[20] A refinement of such an instrument makes it probable that an affirmative response should be given to the question of whether or not speech instructors can be trained to develop "value-added" skills in the student.

In the final analysis, we will need to balance public calls for accountability with a sensitivity to differences in institutional mission, and especially with a respect for full, non-threatening, decision-making participation by faculty in the testing process.

Endnotes

1. Cited in Gerald M. Phillips, "A Competent View of 'Competence'," Communication Education, (January, 1984) p. 27.
2. Scott Jaschik, "Public Universities Trying Tests and Surveys to Measure What Students Learn," The Chronicle of Higher Education, (September 18, 1985) p.1.
3. Ibid., p. 16.
4. Peter Ewell, "Assessment: What's It all About?" Change, (November/December, 1985) p.35.
5. Ibid., p. 36.
6. Ibid.
7. Phillips, Ibid., p.34.
8. Ibid., pp. 29-30.
9. In Alexander W. Astin, Achieving Educational Excellence, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985) p. 163. Astin was a member of the Study Group.
10. Ibid., p. 171.
11. Ewell, p. 33.
12. Ibid., p. 35.
13. Ibid.
14. William W. Turnbull, "Are They Learning Anything in College," Change, (November/December) 1985, pp. 24-25.
15. In Jaschik, Ibid., p. 16.
16. Astin, Ibid., p. 67.
17. Ibid., p. 173.

18. Those items are:

1. Pronunciation
2. Facial Expression/Tone of Voice
3. Speech Clarity
4. Persuasive/Inform. Distinction
5. Clarity of Ideas
6. Express and Defend Point of View
7. Recognize Non-Understanding
8. Fact/Opinion Distinction
9. Listening (Understand Suggestions)
10. Identify Main Ideas
11. Summarize
12. Social Ritual
13. Ask questions
14. Answer Questions
15. Express Feelings
16. Organize Ideas
17. Give Directions
18. Describe Another's View
19. Describe Differing Opinion

19. Rebecca B. Rubin, "Assessing Speaking and Listening Competence at the College Level: the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument," Communication Education, (January, 1982) p. 20.

20. For analysis see Ibid., pp. 26-30.